

Downtown as a Center for Culture

One of Downtown’s most unique aspects is its cultural heritage. Set among the great destinations of the Federal city--the Capitol, the National Mall, and the White House--Downtown has a wealth of cultural attractions of its own, including renowned theaters, galleries, museums, and libraries.

Cultural activities and facilities complement office, retail, and entertainment uses and are a key aspect of a comprehensive revitalization strategy. For almost twenty years, civic leaders have advocated a stronger role for the arts downtown. Cultural institutions often act as urban “pioneers”, or catalysts which directly and indirectly generate revenues and increase interest in the urban core. Such activities can increase sales tax



Art galleries are a blend of retail and cultural uses.

revenues, increasing demand for office space, raising property values, and enhancing the public image of the city. Aggregate data from studies in other major urban centers determined that each theater patron spends at least \$50 per visit outside of the theater on parking, transit, food, beverages and retail items. Therefore, the development of 1,600 new theater seats could generate over \$25 million in spin-off sales and \$2 million in tax revenue annually to the District.

Planning for Downtown as a center for arts and cultural is not simply a matter of advocacy and programming; it is also a matter of physical space and economics. Strong growth in the Downtown office market is putting upward pressure on land prices and has made cultural development more difficult. The Action Agenda recommends ways to increase the amount of space available for arts uses beyond those required under existing zoning regulations, and suggests a new set of arts incentives.



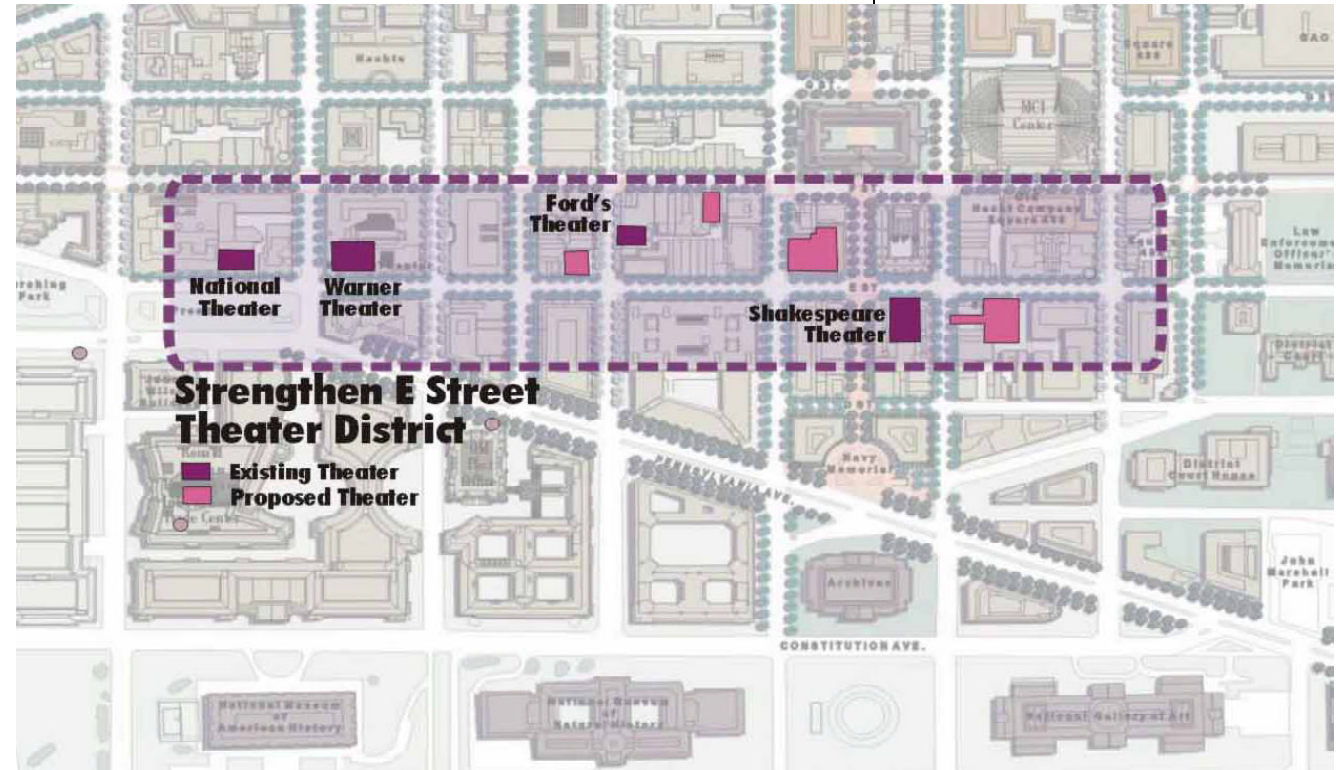
Galleries are attractive additions to the urban streetscape.

Strategy One: Retain and Expand the E Street Theater District

Although more than 720,000 people went to a live theater performance at one of the E Street Theater Row venues (including the National, Warner, Ford's, and Shakespeare Theaters), booking constraints restrict many of the theaters' attendance; 1998 attendance figures represent only 60% of their overall house capacity. At the same time, studies suggest that sufficient demand exists to accommodate the development of 1,600 new seats in four new venues. New theater venues, including performing arts space similar to the Lansburgh, homes for expanding theater companies, and a flexible "black box" space for smaller, emerging companies, can transform E Street into a dynamic "theater district" destination, second only to Times Square in New York.



Theaters attract visitors to Downtown that patronize restaurants, nightclubs, stores, and parking and transit facilities.



Key Actions: Establish a direct mechanism to appropriate capital funds for arts. Adhere to current policy to commit one percent of capital budget for arts uses.



The Arts Walk on 7th Street is a key amenity to Downtown.

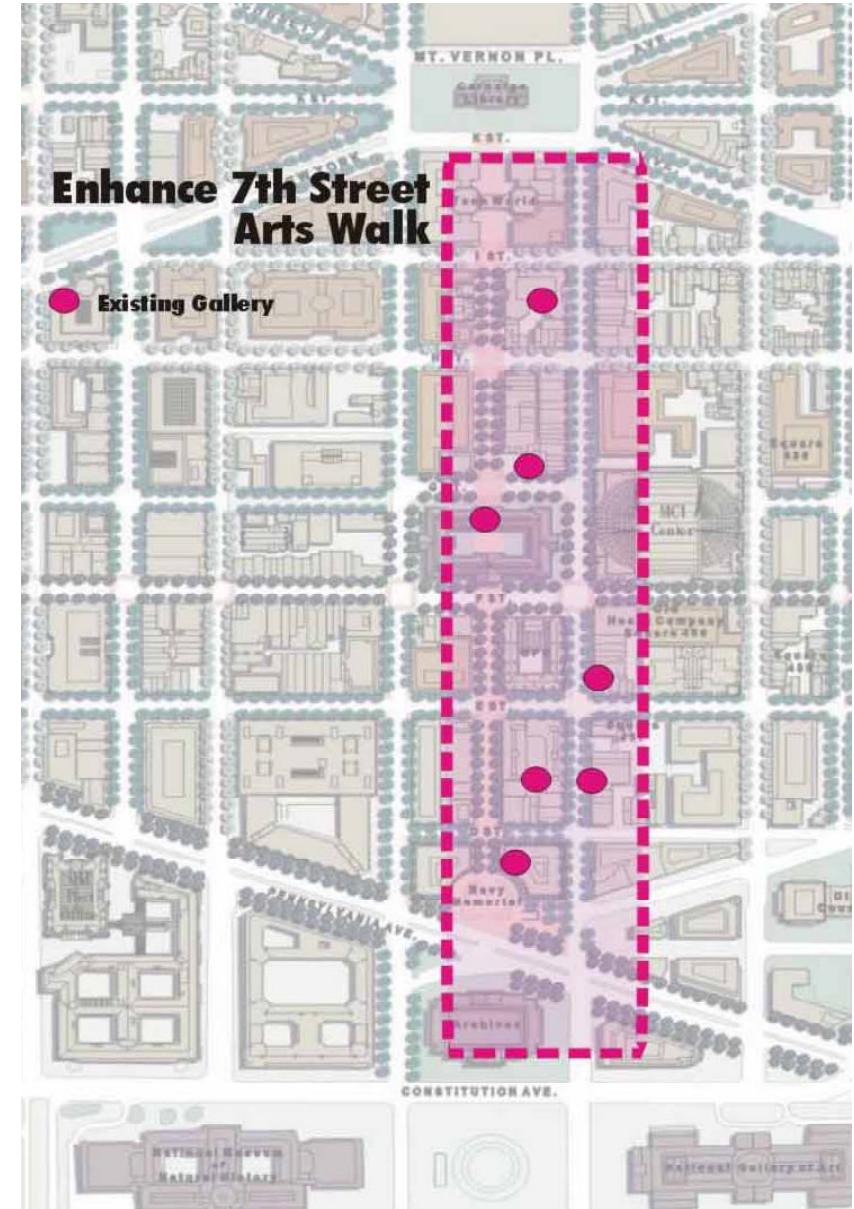
Strategy Two: Cluster Art Galleries along 7th Street to Enhance the Arts Walk

The Seventh Street Arts Walk links the museums and cultural exhibits on the National Mall with close to a dozen art galleries in the Pennsylvania Quarter neighborhood. Even though the Seventh Street Arts Walk is well located and in the Downtown Development District (which grants bonus densities for additional arts spaces), Downtown art galleries are in a precarious state. In the very near future, escalating rents may force many of the private commercial and non-profit galleries near 7th Street to either close or relocate out of Downtown. Since galleries provide economic opportunities for area artists and benefit the cultural perception of the city, it is important to ensure their continued existence by creating a strong, coherent arts corridor. Where feasible, galleries and artists' live/work spaces should be included in developments on publicly owned sites.



Ideally, an expanded cluster of arts-related uses should be located along 7th Street in the Gallery Place area. Redevelopment of historic buildings as art galleries and exhibition spaces, indoor and outdoor art installations, and the proposed Downtown Circulator would each help transform 7th Street into an "18-hour" arts destination.

Key Action: Aggressively market the arts district



Strategy Three: Attract Major Cultural Venues to Downtown

It is paramount that major facilities for cultural arts be located Downtown. One-of-a-kind venues, such as performing arts spaces, the MCI Center, and major museums, draw people to the Downtown area from the National Mall and the Convention Center. Marketing, financial, and regulatory incentives can help Downtown become the region's focus for cultural arts performances and exhibitions.

Downtown needs a multi-use facility that can serve as a cultural information hub for the District. A redeveloped and expanded Martin Luther King, Jr. Library could be adapted to serve as a dual-purpose cultural center and headquarters library. This site is ideal as it is near Gallery Place and is large enough to accommodate exhibits, performances, and other events. Another key opportunity is the existing convention center site, which can be redeveloped with a mix of cultural attractions and other uses.

Studios or apartments with living space as well as flexible exhibit, performance, and working spaces should be developed in city-owned properties near 7th Street and north of Massachusetts Avenue. The Mather Building on G Street and the Franklin School at 13th & K Streets could offer ideal settings for affordable studios and flexible exhibit/rehearsal space that will help create new energy for the arts in Downtown.

Key Actions: Develop tax abatements to expand or attract arts uses wherever possible; Initiate a new facilities plan for the MLK Library to make it a focal point for cultural and civic activity; Encourage gallery and arts uses wherever possible.

